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FLARR Pages #58: From O Grove to Oak Grove or From the Faro de Vigo to the Fargo Forum

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FLARR PAGES #58

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- Paper
- International
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"FROM O GROVE TO OAK GROVE or FROM THE FARO DE VIGO TO THE FARGO FORUM,"
BENJAMIN SMITH, MOORHEAD STATE UNIVERSITY

Iberian Culture and Civilization

At Minnesota State University Moorhead, a course is offered for 3rd year students that centers on Spanish culture. The goal of this course is to explore the country of Spain in a way that students become interested in what their civilization has contributed to global culture in humanistic, scientific, artistic, and historical advancements. We explore Spanish linguistics from its origins in Latin, Arabic and Greek. We watch demonstrative films of the beautiful landscape and the people's diversity and personality. Not a detail is left out of the day to day culture pertaining to the cuisine, the wine culture, the agriculture, the sculpture and music. But not only this, also, we spend time on why Spaniards eat more at midday and why Catalan is spoken in Barcelona and why *Madrileños* like to spend the month of August on the coast. Our university seeks to understand the essence of what it means to be Spanish.

Term paper

As part of the course, a term paper is assigned where students can delve into one aspect or another of Spanish culture. Among the topics to choose from are things such as: Manchegan patriotism in Miguel de Cervantes' writings, the innovation of Pablo Picasso's paintings, the diversity of Galician cuisine, machismo, bull fighting, and the history of Flamenco just to mention a few. Apart from the topics of *haute culture* there are also themes of more simple interests such as *siesta*, fashion, and Spanish humor. The method of presentation is left up to the student. Students are encouraged to present their research orally but that in doing so, they involve the other students by engaging them in conversation.

In the Fall of 2004, I had one particular student, Brian Iverson who, intent on finding a topic that no one else in the class had considered, wanted to focus on Spanish humor and how it differed from that of the kind of humor appreciated by North Americans. After following a few hints from his professor he set to researching via the internet comics, jokes sites, political caricatures and popular parodies. Time after time, he came across the work of one José Ángel Rodríguez López, better known as "Gogue", an artist from Galicia, who because of his electronic presence, seemed to be the most popular artist in Spain. With a touch of reserve, not knowing how his professor would react to a proposal to study a character apparently so far removed from the kind of cultural prospects being discussed in class, Brian brought it up. Not being able to find any books or articles on Gogue in the University library, he became a little disillusioned not being able to do the traditional research associated with looking up information in print. Nevertheless, his professor encouraged him to contact the artist directly and ask questions at the source. Taking courage, he sent an email to Gogue and by the next day had received an enthusiastic response.

American Humor vs. Spanish Humor

The idea of being able to share his world vision with a student on the other side of the Atlantic was fascinating to Gogue. From there, a friendship sprouted into a life long relationship. The research was carried out principally via daily emails. For an American student without experience abroad, it was a timely opportunity for Brian to practice his Spanish and to learn about a region of Spain that up until this class, he had no idea existed. Of course, Gogue did not leave out a single detail regarding his Galician identity. Brian commented one day that he not only had a new appreciation for Galician culture, he had an appreciation he never had before.

In class, Brian became the most involved and focused student in class. In his presentation, he shared a depth of understanding comfortably with his peers. His term paper had become a rite of passage between the kind of routine assignments doled out by arcane professors to the focal point of his interest.

The Idea of a Visit

To Brian's professor, Benjamin Smith, the idea that he be in touch with a Spaniard as his primary source of information for his project was pure genius. Even better is this situation was that the Galician in question was a well-known artist intent on sharing the best his culture had to offer. Professor Smith wrote Gogue in January of 2005 to thank him for establishing a friendship with Brian and share with him his perspective of how well the whole term paper went. It was then that he planted the idea of a visit to Minnesota and Gogue latched on to the suggestion enthusiastically. The professor's idea throughout this entire ordeal was that the relationship begun in a course of Spanish culture could culminate in the arrival of his culture on the shores of Minnesota. Such an event would be the climax of innovation in foreign language pedagogy.

In these parts, the reality is that very little Spanish culture ever makes it here and even less authentic Spaniards. While there is a considerable degree of influence from Mexican culture, the opportunities for students to get to know the origins of Hispanic culture are few and far between. Stereotypes are fed by films and melodramas that emphasize bullfights, flamenco, and windmills. For a teacher, an opportunity to expand the community's vision of Spain in this way is rare that when it comes, it needs to be pursued. Professor Smith saw several makings of an ideal project. Everything from a disinterested student (now

converted to a true Hispanophile) a Spanish artist interested in sharing his culture, students thirsty for the culture they are studying, connections with illustration classes in another department and then the universal appeal to Spanish language course – the only thing left was to secure funding for the project.

In March, 2005 we drafted a plan, and refined it and revised it several times. Having come up with a document in which we were confident, we submitted a proposal to the Gallery Committee to bring a foreign artist to the University. The approval was anonymous. Not only did they like this idea, but the dean, the vice president, and even the president jumped on board and contributed funds so that Gogue would have what he needed to be able to come and present his work to the community. Professor Smith worked in tandem with the director of the MSUM Art Gallery, Jane Gudmunson, organizing a week of pedagogically centered activities all designed to give Gogue and his student fan the maximum profile. Gogue set to work on a series of portraits of famous Spaniards requested by Professor Smith in addition to his every-day work on the comic strip. The idea was soon that instead of exhibiting a collection of caricatures of American icons (of which Gogue has a substantial collection) it should be an opportunity to educate the public with some of the most illustrious characters from Spanish History.

In preparation for the visit, we did a lot of publicity for Gogue at the University and in the community. One of the forums for publicity was in current Spanish courses. With the familiar dialogue in Galician, the Gogue's comic strips with the main character, Floreano, served as an excellent source for information about Galicia, the language and its people. From a comic strip as basic as the one presented here, one can take away grammar lessons such as: the use of the subjunctive and noun/adjective agreement as well as the passive voice. In addition to these grammar points, there are linguistic lessons on Galician cognates with Spanish such as *che, vai, cando, veñan, moi, xa, sei, desir*, etc. Finally, there is a lesson on the influence of English and the taboo surrounding vulgar expressions such as *carallo* and the way in which Floreano uses these words. The strip isn't necessarily intended to be the principal focus of the lesson but it serves as supplementary material to the prepared lesson and strengthens the linguistic points the students are already learning.

In addition to the academic goals of intersection between the cities of O Grove and Moorhead, MN, we were interested in collaboration along the lines of a Sister City style relationship and we put the mayors of each city in contact with one another. Being a Sister City type relationship not involving cities of the caliber of Madrid or New York, our cities only a little while ago were not even aware of each other's existence. Nevertheless, they grew increasingly more interested in their differences and similarities. On the one hand, O Grove is a port city that thrives principally on the basis of its fishing industry. The climate is moderate with rainy winters and summers full of tourists that visit from the hinterland. Though O Grove itself has only 15,000 inhabitants, the surrounding communities with which it seamlessly meshes number in the hundreds of thousands. Moorhead, on the other hand, is situated mid-continent far from the well-known urban centers of the U.S. Its climate varies between the extremes of winter chill and summer heat and humidity. Concerning the season in which we had invited Gogue to visit, fall was in full swing and one could appreciate the fresh air and the changing colors on the leaves of the oak trees. Moorhead is separated by the Red River of the North, from Fargo, the largest city in North Dakota. The total population in this area is around 150,000.

With the idea of a personal contact on the other side of the Atlantic, Gogue became an cultural ambassador sent from the Mayor of O Grove to research the possibilities of relations between the two cities. Likewise inspired by the idea was Mark Voxland, mayor of Moorhead, who already nurtures a Sister City relationship with cities in Norway and Lithuania. The impetus was sufficient to add another facet to the visit – that of diplomatic link and furtherance of international ties.

All this work was being continuously coordinated with the director of the art gallery, using her experience in organizing such events. Visits were planned to Spanish classes, art classes and illustration classes at MSUM. Purely on a whim, we also contacted a local High School teacher in Fargo to be included among the visits that Gogue would make to students in the area. Jane Gudmunson also planned a reception in the gallery where Gogue could present his work and where he could feel at home among the trappings of his profession and favorite pastime. Throughout this entire process, we kept at the forefront the principal goal of bringing Spanish culture to students in Minnesota. That way, they could appreciate the contributions and transatlantic collaboration of this Galician ambassador.

With the arrival of the Fall 2005 semester, students were prepared for his visit with assignments on Galician culture and the Galician language. All the way from beginning level classes to advanced classes, part of the curriculum was set aside to study the region from which our honored guest would be visiting. With some of his best comic strips, caricatures and sculptures, discussions were fostered about Pop culture in Spain and the influence of American media on European culture. We researched the great characters of Spain's history such as Manuel Fraga, Camilo José Cela and Pablo Picasso among others. All of this was done beforehand in order to be able to speak with Gogue and understand a little better about where he was coming from.

Media Attention

As an employee of one of the most popular newspapers in Spain, the *Faro de Vigo*, Gogue had access to publicity and the ability to let more than 200,000 readers know about his new contacts in America. From there, he took advantage of the opportunity (as a symbol of his friendship that Brian would come to know all too well) and made a caricature of Brian arm in arm with Floreano, the star of his comic strip, and sent him a copy. Brian was astonished that this master of art and caricature would choose to select him as an object of such talent. Yet with this he became even more encouraged in his enthusiasm for the project. Striving night and day to produce something worthy of the topic of his work, Brian also took advantage of the spotlight to entertain an interview with a reporter from the *Faro de Vigo* that appeared in print in January 2005.

Once in Moorhead, there were two more interviews with the *Fargo Forum*. The first included Brian Iverson and Professor Smith. At that point, the American reporter was intent upon discovering how the whole relationship came about between Gogue and Brian. She was interested in the initial class assignment and just like the Media in Spain, asked about how a Spanish artist could become interested in a little town as far out of the way as Moorhead, Minnesota. We also spoke about the pedagogical basis and the possibilities for international relations between O Grove and Moorhead.

Other contacts with the Media were with the Radio, specifically with *Cadena Cope* in Vigo. After interviewing Gogue around the middle of September 2005, they wanted to interview Professor Smith. As it turned out the interview took place on the 27th of September (which according to one student studying abroad in Granada at the time) was heard all over the country. The interview focused primarily on Gogue's visit to Minnesota and his increasing popularity. At one point the interviewer asked Professor Smith if he considered Gogue more popular than Fernando Alonso, the champion Galician Formula One driver. The interview also covered the link of friendship between American students and Galicia. Given the fact that it is seen as such a remote area, the mere fact that the two would be aware of each other at all seems to be the stuff of dreams. In Fargo/Moorhead, one of the local Television stations showed a degree of enthusiasm with the idea of an AM interview and a publicity announcement on Gogue's exhibit in the MSUM art gallery, however upon learning that the interview would be live and entirely in English, Gogue decided he would rather not go through with it being satisfied with the coverage in the Newspaper. The *Fargo Forum* article appeared in the October 6th edition of the paper with Gogue's most famous character, Floreano, on the front page coinciding with the date of the art gallery reception at the University.

The Master's Visit

On the night of his arrival, October 2nd, 2005, Professor Benjamin Smith gave a lecture celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Publication of *Don Quixote*. The lecture concentrated on the transition between the Middle Ages and Modernity drawing on examples from the novel that highlighted linguistic and cultural innovations. There was a discussion that arose on problems of translation between Old Spanish and Modern Spanish as well as between Spanish and English. This background served as an appropriate segue into the events of the coming week and the impact of Gogue's visit on our community.

October 3 - Monday

With 7 hours difference between Galicia and Minnesota, when they arrived at 10:00 PM, for Gogue and his charming wife, it was 5:00 in the morning, being almost 24 hours without sleep. Regardless, the reunion in person after nearly a year of online correspondence was priceless. They arrived smiling broadly insisting that they were at the service of the welcoming committee, which consisted of Brian Iverson and Professor Smith. With that license, the activities started bright and early the next morning at 8:30 when they were picked up from their hotel to meet the Mayor of Moorhead, Mark Voxland and to go on a brief tour of downtown Moorhead.

October 4th - Tuesday

From the Mayor's office there is a view of almost the entire city of Moorhead and its 32,000 inhabitants. Mayor Voxland was excited to finally meet Gogue and his wife, Sefa. Gogue did not lose time in delivering in person a plaque from the Mayor of O Grove, Miguel Ángel Pérez García. Gogue also presented a packet of materials regarding the city and its environs to Mayor Voxland as well as several other mementoes. From there we went on a tour of the downtown area under rainy skies. The tour took us to a small cyber café where Sefa and Gogue tasted for the first time some true American coffee (which, they claimed was not all that bad). After going on a quick run about the city, the next stop was the *Red Bear Inn*. On the way to this appointment, Gogue was on his cell phone dictating an interview with the Radio station back in Galicia regarding the *Centollo de Oro* (Golden Crab) award he was to receive the coming week at their annual Seafood Festival in O Grove. At lunch is where Gogue and Brian had the first opportunity to sit down and enjoy one another's company. It is here also that Mila Koumpilova, reporter for *The Fargo Forum*, while eating lunch with us, interviewed the two, peppering them with questions. Gogue enjoyed his first "Rueben" sandwich there and was so impressed that they ordered the same thing for dinner that night. From the restaurant Gogue and Sefa were treated to a personal tour of the *Fargo Forum* building by Bob Lind, reporter and columnist for the paper for over 3 decades. With less than 15 minutes rest, Gogue was taken to the Private Prep school, *Oak Grove* where they saw for the first time the American School system in all its grandeur. There, they visited a Spanish class that included visitors from the art department. The bilingual students felt right at home asking questions in Spanish, although for many it was the first time they had heard a Spanish accent, much less a Galician accent. Our generous hosts gave a sweatshirt to Gogue with the name *Oak Grove* embroidered across the front. The detail was not lost on the visitors as O Grove and Oak Grove were now not so remote from each other. The rest of the afternoon was given to visiting a local shopping mall, *West Acres* and a dinner at the local *Bennigan's*.

October 5 - Wednesday

Wednesday began sunny and mild. Upon arriving at the University, Gogue and Sefa accompanied by Brian spent the entire morning going from one class to another speaking in Spanish with students from all over North Dakota and Minnesota. They spoke on Galician culture and its unique traits. The *Centollo de Oro* prize was mentioned as well as the upcoming Seafood Festival that they were anticipating upon their return to O Grove. The students exhibited a great deal of curiosity about their accent and how it compared with the Spanish they were learning in class. In one morning, Gogue, Sefa and Brian visited five different classes and spoke with over 100 students. After lunch in the University cafeteria, Gogue spoke with an illustration class where they were fascinated watching Gogue draw. They sat speechless as they watched him bring to life his famous character, Floreano, on a 4' X 20' canvas tacked to the wall. Gogue had a lot of fun drawing and speaking to the students. He depicted Floreano in a basketball jersey wearing the number of his son's favorite player, Lebron James. This was the first time Floreano had been drawn in America. The situation in the Gallery was such that Gogue could choose to draw on the canvas or on an easel and the students could sit and observe him as though in his own studio. The rest of the afternoon, Gogue spent entertaining students through an interpreter with tales of his caricatures and illustration methods.

Wednesday night was a special engagement whose purpose was to honor our guests by means of an authentic Galician dinner. To Gogue, the sea bass was so well prepared that he felt moved to comment, "It was as though I could close my eyes and

find myself back in Galicia." There he was toasted by a number of individuals who came to learn more about him and the culture from which he was visiting. At the end of the night he was even presented with a bottle of Riojan wine.

October 6th – Thursday

Thursday brought another full day of visiting classes and students anxious to meet this now famous artist and hear his stories. This was also the day set aside for Gogue to draw his comic strip from Moorhead that would be published the following day in the *Faro de Vigo* in Spain. For Gogue to be able to pull it off, he would need a computer lab (so the students could observe), some special drawing pencils, a ruler, and a sketch pad. All of these materials were donated by faculty from the MSUM Department of Art and Design. Gogue did not lose any time in creating a unique comic strip as a memory of his visit. He drew Floreano leaning up against a wooden sign with "Minnesota" scrawled upon it and his ever-present wife, Mochiña, scolding him for having seen too many western films. The same comic strip was scanned into the computer and sent to the editor of the *Faro de Vigo* to be published in the October 8th copy of the paper. As it turns out, the strip appeared in the Saturday, October 9th paper.

Gogue visited other Spanish classes and one more illustration class before the afternoon reception in the art gallery where more than 200 people were waiting for him. There, in the gallery Jane Gudmunson had set up a small theater area where visitors could view the video about Gogue's life produced by *Imaxina* in Galicia. She had also beautifully mounted the 15 works Gogue had sent out beforehand that were to be donated to the University. Also playing on a computer in the gallery was Brian Iverson's original Power Point presentation as part of his term project.

On his last night in Moorhead, we treated Gogue and Sefa to a dinner at the best restaurant in town, *Sarello's*, for some exquisite Italian food together with Brian Iverson, Professor Smith and his wife Norma and two students, Joseph Hall (preparing for a two-year mission trip to Spain) and Sergio Blanco (from Málaga, Spain). On the following morning bright and early, Gogue and his wife boarded a plane for New York. For them, no trip to the US would have been complete without a visit to the Big Apple.

From this initial contact and intersection of our lives, nothing has been the same. We stay in touch with Gogue on a weekly basis. Now there is a precedent for upcoming transatlantic projects. The world is flatter and smaller. The meeting of a student and a Spanish artist has changed the rules of pedagogy. In times of old if a student were to ask the meaning of a word, all that was needed was to send him or her to the dictionary to find the meaning. Nowadays, if students want to know the meaning of life, they reach out and take the world by the horns and discover it not far beyond the tips of their fingers.

Since then...

As of now, 2006, MSUM possesses the 15 works produced especially by Gogue for the University, in addition to which there is an increased familiarity with Spanish and more specifically, Galician culture. Together with this dossier are included copies of each of the 15

caricatures together with biographies of the individuals to be used when shared in an teaching exercise. These can be used as "cultural appetizers" in teaching about Spanish culture as a springboard to deeper discussions. Once again, they are not intended to be stand-alone lessons, rather as practical exercises with a lighter content.

These caricatures are being used in classes at the University as well as in local public schools. They function as a packet of materials that a teacher can grab on the go to do cultural presentations. In this way, the legacy left by Gogue's visit to our fair city will continue, although remote, touching the lives of Americans whom the artist never imagined he would reach. And all this, beginning with a simple term paper assignment...